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Ifaluk

Joshua I. Tracey, geologist, of the U. S. Geological Survey, on Ifaluk from September 12 to 26. 114

We came curiously and quickly to have a feeling of "belonging" on Ifaluk, and we found ourselves much involved with the people of the island in everything that we did. Inevitably, however, we were more closely associated with some than with others, and it may be helpful to identify here the people with whom we were most concerned, whose names appear most frequently in our narrative: 114 115 115

Fagolier, the paramount chief of Ifaluk.

Maroligar, the number two chief, guardian of the Fan Nap, where we lived.

Toromau, the number three chief and the official divider of food.

Lavausrung, the number four chief; a lady.

Wolpaitik, the number five chief (and the heaviest man on the island).

Totogoeiti (Tom), Ted's interpreter, and top ranking navigator (palu) of the island.

Yaniseman (Yani), "schoolteacher" and constant companion and advisor.

Bakalimar (Bakal), initially assigned as our special helper in camp and field, working later with Harry's fishing gang.

Tachiwelimeng (Tachim), neighbor, friend, and later one of Harry's fishing crew.

Letaweriur, Yani's wife and a composer of dance chants.

Cavileisei, master craftsman and canoe builder.

Gauaisig, an old man, navigator and canoe builder.

Talimeira, houseboy of Burrows and Spiro in 1948, now one of the two local "doctors."

Arueligar, "high priest" or "medicine man."

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obliterated completely. The ferocious wind scooped up the sea and hurled it over the island, ruining the fresh water in our rain catchments. The waves came up into the canoe houses and crumpled some of them. All canoes had previously been dragged inland into the villages and tied down between the houses. One of the women's club houses, which also served as maternity ward and hospital, began swaying under the impact of the storm. The women and children were removed to safety just before it disappeared in a spray of flying splinters. The waves piled up and crashed on the beach rolling water a hundred yards inland. The islands are only ten feet above sea level and the ocean threatened to inundate the land. All the coconuts and most of the fronds had been stripped from the trees. For nine months afterwards the people were on short rations and no copra could be produced."

The same trade ship brought news that another storm, about a month before, had hit Ulithi when a fleet of fishing canoes was out on the reef. Three canoes, with seven men, disappeared. The lost men included Tony's uncle, brother and nephew, and his niece lost her husband.

Ifaluk was too close to the equator to be often in the path of typhoons; it was in the area where these storms generally build up, gaining hurricane force as they move north. The island had not been struck by a major typhoon since 1907, but the storm of that year was a fearful one, and its mark was still on the island. From the lagoon, a few coconut palms stood out, much taller than the others; they were the survivors of the 1907 disaster. Great blocks of coral tossed up on the reef before Falalap were testimony enough to the unbelievable force of the sea.

The wind continued, but it could be ignored now that it held no threat of increased violence, and in the evening Don and I started seriously on our project of learning something about the language of Ifaluk. We had asked one of the young men, Yaniseman, to help with this, and he turned up with his good friend Tachiwelimeng.

This was the beginning of a close friendship and constant collaboration. Yaniseman was one of three young men from the island who had been sent to Yap for several months by the government of the Trust Territory to learn English and, on return, to serve as teachers for the island. The English that they could learn in this time was rudimentary.

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but they were anxious to learn more. Don proposed a sort of trade with Yani of English lessons for Ifaluk lessons. This developed presently into a regular session, every second or third night, with about a dozen of the young men of the island in attendance. I soon dropped out. The English-Ifalukian exchange thus became Don's enterprise: he had a special interest, since he would be staying on after Ted and I left.

By next morning (Sunday) the wind had pretty much died down, and the census operation was continued. About noon, a Navy ship was sighted off Falarik. The walkie-talkies were again unlimbered and contact was established. It turned out to be a destroyer escort, calling by the island to check typhoon damage. They sent in a rubber landing boat with a half a dozen men who spent about an hour wandering around the island trading cigarettes for shells, and then took off. It began to look as though Ifaluk, instead of being isolated in the remote Pacific, was a busy crossroads.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and finally the census was completed —or at least the first draft of the census. We made out a detailed list of all of the people, household by household, with a copy for each of us, and we kept making small changes all summer, finally making a complete recheck at the end of the summer to be sure we had everything straight. When I think of the trouble we had keeping track of 200 people, I get a new insight into the problem of census operations in a country like the United States. "Census" will never again be just a word.

The Ifalukians did not count years, and consequently did not know exactly how old they were. They did, however, have a series of words for age groups: saugau for infant, sari for child, tarimwan for young man, liveirik for a girl past puberty, and so forth. Old men and old women were called tufai and there were a number of old people on the island: twenty-eight men and thirty women in the tufai class, to be exact, so that about a third of the population was in the old age group. Some of these, including Tom, were adults at the time of the 1907 typhoon, so that they must have been in their sixties at the time of our visit: but they were healthy, vigorous and obviously enjoying life.

Ted asked each woman of childbearing age how many children she had had, how many were still living, and—for those that had died—